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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001748

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [RS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER SAYS AN AOUN VICTORY
THREATENS PRESIDENT AND SPEAKER

REF: A. BEIRUT 1731
[B](#). BEIRUT 1722
[C](#). BEIRUT 1732

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) In a December 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Defense Minister Elias Murr assessed that President Michel Sleiman, annoyed at the royal treatment Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun received during his trip to Syria, feels threatened by the prospect of a decisive Aoun victory in the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Even Aoun's ally Speaker Nabih Berri feels threatened by an Aoun victory, Murr relayed, because he thinks Aoun will not support Berri staying on as Speaker. Murr said Sleiman remains undecided on whether to form his own parliamentary bloc, while the Armenian Tashnaq party is committed to allying with Murr's father, MP Michel Murr, and is not absolutely committed to Aoun.

[2](#). (C) Defense Minister Murr, who will travel to Russia on December 14, said he had been told that Russia will only sell, and not give, weapons to Lebanon, which he considered a "non-starter." He said Saad Hariri and PM Fouad Siniora were adamant the GOL would find the funds required to pay for the M60 tanks. He stressed that his trip to Syria, potentially in January, will focus only on UN Security Council Resolution [1701](#). End summary.

SLEIMAN THREATENED
BY AOUN VICTORY...

[3](#). (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met Defense Minister Elias Murr at his home in Rabieh on December 10. Murr, who had accompanied President Michel Sleiman to Germany the previous week, provided his insight into Sleiman's thinking. According to Murr, Sleiman feels threatened by the prospect of a decisive victory by Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun during the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Murr said Sleiman believes that a success for Aoun's bloc would result in a reduction of the president's role. Sleiman reportedly told Murr, "If Aoun wins, I may as well pack my bags for the rest of my term."

...AND ANNOYED AT SYRIA
FOR EMPOWERING AOUN

¶4. (C) Murr added that Sleiman was still steaming about Aoun's visit to Damascus the previous week, during which Aoun appeared to receive presidential treatment. According to Murr, Sleiman opted not to telephone Syrian President Bashar Asad for the Eid al-Adha holiday because of his annoyance at the treatment Aoun received, and quoted Sleiman saying of Asad "If he wants to deal with Aoun the gangster, let him!"

SLEIMAN STILL UNSURE ABOUT
FORMING PARLIAMENTARY BLOC

¶5. (C) On the idea of forming his own parliamentary bloc (Ref A), Murr reported that Sleiman was still considering this option, underlining that such a bloc would be allied with March 14, not March 8. Murr further stressed that Sleiman is focusing on strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), positioning it as the tool with which to confront Hizballah on the issue of its arms at the National Dialogue. Murr said there is no agenda yet for the December 22 National Dialogue session, but he expected it and all other sessions until the elections would be uncontroversial.

¶6. (C) Sleiman "may be a better president than LAF Commander," Murr said, commending the president's balanced approach and carefully-crafted decisions. He noted that

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Sleiman had requested that Murr represent him at the December 13 ceremony commemorating former MP Gebran Tueini's assassination, interpreting this move as a symbol of Lebanese perseverance. (Tueini was assassinated in 2005. Murr survived a 2005 assassination attempt, which he blames on Syria.) Murr claimed that Sleiman "cannot stand" the Iranians and is planning to send his son to the U.S. for advanced medical training, a demonstration of Sleiman's commitment to Lebanon's relationship with the U.S.

TASHNAQ FIRMLY ALLIED
WITH MICHEL MURR

¶7. (C) Recounting a recent meeting with Armenian Tashnaq SYG Hovig Mekhitarian, Murr reported that Tashnaq declared to Asad its allegiance to Murr's father, MP Michel Murr, when the group visited Damascus December 1 (Ref B). Asad purportedly did not push Tashnaq to remain allied with Aoun at Michel Murr's expense, said Murr.

BERRI ALSO THREATENED
BY AOUN VICTORY

¶8. (C) Murr noted that Saad Hariri continues to meet with Amal MP Ali Hassan Khalil, because Speaker Nabih Berri remains concerned about possible tensions between Sunnis and Shia. He claimed Berri also dispatched Khalil to meet him to discuss a compromise on the electoral list for the Metn district (the Murr family stronghold) to divide the list between Murr's candidates and Aoun's candidates. Murr said he declined out of deference to his father, the true list-maker (Ref C).

¶9. (C) Murr claimed his father would rather lose than "give seats to Aoun for free." He interpreted Khalil's visit to mean that Berri is concerned that a sweeping Aoun victory might result in Berri losing his job as Speaker, since Aoun previously said he wanted "anyone but Berri."

RUSSIA WILL ONLY SELL,
NOT GIVE, WEAPONS TO LAF

¶10. (C) In advance of his trip to Moscow on December 14, Murr relayed that he and Saad Hariri had met with Mikhael Dimitri, head of the Russian Federal Commission for Military and Technical Cooperation with Foreign States, (responsible for weapons exports) earlier in the week. Murr said he received clarification from Dimitri that Russia is unable to donate, but was willing to sell, tanks, helicopters -- "everything" to the LAF. In response to Murr's assertion that the GOL lacked the funds, Dimitri reportedly suggested that the Saudis provide assistance.

¶11. (C) Murr interpreted Hariri's role in the meeting as posturing -- "Saad wants to show the U.S. that Russia could arm the LAF." Murr stressed, "We won't get a bullet from Russia during our tenure." He said both Hariri and Siniora encouraged him to visit Moscow for protocol reasons, even though the trip will not lead to an arms deal.

¶12. (C) Murr claimed that Dimitri downplayed Russia's ties to Syria, saying that while his country had strategic relations with Syria, they centered on securing a regional counterbalance to the U.S. and did not run counter to Russia's support for Lebanon.

GOL "CONFIDENT" IT WILL
SECURE FUNDING FOR M60S

¶13. (C) According to Murr, Hariri expressed confidence that the GOL will come up with a donation from another country to finance the needed \$80 million for the M60 tanks that are part of the USG assistance package should Saudi financing be delayed. (Note: We believe the amount is \$98 million. End note.) Murr explained that the delay is due to Saudi Crown

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Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz being ill.

¶14. (C) Once the LAF receives the M60 tanks from Jordan and the Leopard tanks from Belgium (which Murr expects soon), Murr said he will have two battalions of new tanks. Murr added that Lebanon will receive \$3 million in donor funding for arming the Gazelles (a reference to the French Gazelle helicopters transferred to the LAF by the UAE).

MURR TO DISCUSS ONLY
UNSCR 1701 IN SYRIA

¶15. (C) Murr insisted that when he visits Syria, most likely in January, he will focus his discussions solely on UN Security Council Resolution 1701. He expected to present the agenda for his trip to the cabinet in the beginning of January in order to avoid the criticism recently lodged against his GOL colleagues who visited Syria. Murr defended LAF Commander Jean Kahwagi's meeting with President Asad, explaining that the meeting was sprung on Kahwagi, who called Murr from Damascus for advice. Murr was clear about his discomfort with his own upcoming visit, given that he blames the Syrians for attempting to kill him.

SISON